



Carlo van de Roer

The Portrait Machine Project

The medium of photography, though scientifically rooted, has always been permeable to chance and serendipitous elements. Between the opening of the shutter and the capture of an image there exists ample space for unknown or incidental forces to influence the creation of a picture. In both viewing and creating photographs we are often surprised by a photograph's capture of fleeting moments or things unseen. And despite knowing better, we tend to be believers, or want to be, when an image comes to us in photographic form. Even our digital age, with all of its software manipulation, cannot entirely extinguish our immediate sense of the reality depicted by a photograph. It is thus a natural fit that those in search of the supernatural, paranormal, and forces invisible to the human eye, would turn to photography as a rational means to pursue the inexplicable. Spirit photography, aura photography, and other occult interests have been a significant genre of photography since Victorian times and, as evidenced by many recent books and exhibitions exploring the subject, remain of interest today.

Carlo Van de Roer is not necessarily a believer in the occult, but he is fascinated by the elusive juncture between the action of a camera and the creation of a photograph. He finds this most evident in the process of portraiture, where the subject, the photographer, and the camera all contribute their part in the making of a portrait. As a photographer questioning exactly how each of these factors contributes to the capture of a meaningful likeness, he was intrigued when he came across a camera called the AuraCam. According to its creators the AuraCam captures the image of a person's aura, an invisible energy field said to emanate from all living beings. If this camera could truly bypass the role of the photographer by providing an autonomous portrait of a subject, Van de Roer hoped that in working with it he might better see, and understand, how a camera is part of the creative process in ways that a photographer or sitter may not be aware of. This was the beginning of *The Portrait Machine Project*, a selection of which is featured here.

Polaroid Land camera that was developed by California engineer Guy Coggins and has been available to the public since 1992. The camera is connected to biofeedback receptors that take an electromagnetic reading through the subject's hands and convert it into frequencies corresponding to certain colours. A first exposure of two seconds makes a straight Polaroid portrait. Then a second, double exposure of six to eight seconds superimposes the colour clouds representing the aura. The AuraCam also generates a diagram and text analysis of the aura from three perspectives: what the subject experiences, what the subject projects to others, and what the subject is creating for their future. For Van de Roer, the AuraCam was the ideal tool to explore how a camera's mechanisms can mediate the image making process whether or not employed deliberately by the photographer. He set out to make a series of portraits that would synthesise his own vision with the auras produced by the camera.

The colours generated by the AuraCam are intended to represent a specific set of meanings, though they can also be appreciated as abstract colour fields, eliciting personal reactions simply by the way they interact with the underlying straight photograph. But knowing that there is a commonly accepted significance for each colour, according to the tradition of aura interpretation, makes the analyses generated by the AuraCam part of both the fun and mystery whether or not they are taken at face value. Each colour represents a range of qualities, which in simplest terms can be read as follows: red auras signify power and vitality, orange auras connote creativity and sociability, yellow indicates enthusiasm and optimism, green represents patience and dedication, blue is associated with sensitive and solitary individuals, violet with magic and psychic abilities, and white with very spiritual people.

Van de Roer includes the AuraCam's printed analysis as a form of caption for each portrait. The viewer can look at the portraits, read the automated interpretations and consider, or reconsider, the portraits while filtering through the information provided. The grammatical style and language of the AuraCam is of a

particular New Age-ese that is instantly recognisable to anyone who reads astrology or is familiar with any field of the occult. The text contains information that is specific yet vague, descriptively cryptic, affirming, and generally positive. An excerpt of text accompanying the portrait of Terence Koh provides an example of text that is an open-ended statement rather than a direct description:

Green is a growth colour, it brings spring to mind. Like the new grass popping up out of the dark soil, small leaves stretching out from the barren branch-ends, as the last days of winter slumber fade and the renewal of life begins.

Another sample of text, providing a more descriptive slant, comes from a portrait of Miranda July:

People see you as magical. You put out the highest vibrational frequency. What you want comes to you as if by magic. You seem to get everything you need. A mystic union, a high degree of sensitive intimacy, leading to complete fusion between you and what you put your attention on.

After reading through the text, one cannot help but revisit the portrait with new thoughts in mind, and try to draw connections between what appears in the photograph and what the camera claims to have learned through seeing the subject's aura.

From the beginning, Van de Roer was curious to see how the AuraCam would portray a subject in comparison to what he already knew about that person. He chose to photograph people he knew well, or who he had a sense of through their art, so that he would have something to judge the resulting images against. He photographed family and friends in his native New Zealand and soon discovered that he was surprisingly good at predicting what the camera's interpretation would be. He photographed friends and artists in New York, where he currently lives, focusing especially on those with a public persona, so that in the end viewers might share the experience with him by bringing their own knowledge of the person to compare with the AuraCam's interpretation. *The Portrait Machine Project* is still ongoing but, in the three years since it began, Van de Roer has found that the auras produced for most subjects are remarkably consistent, not just over the course of a









sitting but over months or even years, and he is often surprised by the difference in what he might expect from a subject, and what the camera interprets. This tension, between his assumptions and the independent feedback from the camera, is just what he was searching for in attempting to create a portrait beyond his own volition.

Although there is clearly room for scepticism, regarding the aura camera or the even the existence of auras at all, Van de Roer's photographs have an aesthetic appeal that transcends the gimmickry. His portrait of July, pensive, introverted, and enshrouded in a rich sea of indigo and centred with a classically rendered white collar, is simply masterful. That the aura cloud was created by the camera, and what exactly it is supposed to signify, are incidental to the success of the overall image. One need only look at other aura photographs, easily viewable online, to see the vast difference between what Van de Roer is doing and the low quality, snapshot-style that the camera typically produces. Van de Roer further removes his photographs from New Age banal by enlarging them to exhibition-sized prints (50 x 40 inches or 24 x 19 inches), taking special care to preserve the colour, tone, and surface texture of the original Polaroid. Despite Van de Roer's deference to the will of the camera, the singularity of his vision and his skill in working with the quirky contributions of the aura camera make a strong case that it is the photographer above all else who gives these portraits their impact. The expressions he captures, the careful lighting, the subjects' body language, and the overall feeling of ease in the exchange between photographer and subject provide the strength behind each photograph. The aura clouds, and their interpretations, add life but are not the reason these portraits succeed.

The consistency of Van de Roer's style, and the specific look of the images produced by the AuraCam, gives *The Portrait Machine Project* a highly unified appearance. But, as is true with all good portraiture, it is the sense of the sitter's presence that gives life to the work. The overall homogeneity of the series

serves as an effective foil allowing each sitter's individuality to shine through. Some subjects appear in the nude, contributing a sensual quality to the colour clouds, as they appear to emanate from their bodies like a form of heat or radiation. Other subjects appear dressed so that the particular details of their personal style, the era, and their persona, penetrate the coloured haze around them with hints of information for the viewer.

It is also significant to note that both the viewer and the sitter have the aura camera in mind. This awareness creates a curious point of contact between both sides of the experience, connecting the moment in time when the portrait was made with the resultant imprint of the aura for posterity. Though all photographs bridge time in this way, our consciousness of the aura reading process brings it into clearer focus. Photographs are always a moment of exposure, in which we allow ourselves to be caught, represented, and taken out of context. The aura-reading aspect merely emphasises this aspect of the experience. While most artists and people in the public sphere are accustomed to being photographed and are often highly aware of how they choose to present themselves, the AuraCam presents something new and beyond control. Thinking of this, and imagining what each sitter experienced during the process, opens the photographs in a uniquely intimate way.

Van de Roer is not the first artist to bring aura photographs into a fine art context. Though the AuraCam was intended for use by aura consultants, healers, or enthusiasts, in the past decade artists such as Anne Collier, Peter Coffin, and Sylvie Fleury have all incorporated aura photographs into their work. Artist Chrysanthe Stathacos spent three years travelling the world taking aura photographs of "spiritual people", investigating the relationship between spirit, colour, and technology. Significantly, all of these artists work in a variety of media and are considered conceptual artists rather than photographers. Van de Roer's project departs from their work by being grounded in a traditionally photographic inquiry. He intends for his

photographs to be considered as portraits, not simply as aura photographs.

While Van de Roer insists he is primarily interested in the AuraCam for what it can reveal about the relationship of subject, photographer and camera, he is obviously fascinated by the idea of photography as a conduit to forces beyond our perception. In two previous series of work he has also explored the intersection of photography and the supernatural. His *Orbs* project and *Blinded by the Light* series address the themes of illusion and the depiction of the paranormal. Van de Roer describes the impetus behind the *Orbs* project as "the photographic search for something larger than ourselves," which coalesces with his venture into *The Portrait Machine Project*. Perhaps Van de Roer's intuition, in recreating "orbs", working with auras, and subtly manipulating his relationship with the means and manifestation of photographic image making, will bring him, and the viewer as well, a little closer to the real magic of photography.

TEXT BY HEATHER SNIDER

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